DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 567 CS 504 699

AUTHOR Blair, Rhonda
TITLE Shakespeare and the Feminist Actor.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (San Francisco, CA, August 12-15, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization; *Drama; *Females; Feminism; Identification (Psychology); Role Conflict; Self Actualization; Sex Fairness; Sex Role; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Shakespeare (William)

ABSTRACT

The major problem with Shakespeare for the woman performer is that he treats women as the "Other." Therefore, his women characters lack the completeness of the men; the women become iconistic forces by means of which the men shape themselves, mirrors in which the men more or less accurately see themselves and their desires and fears. If one defines a feminist work of art as one that presents women as self-identified and expressive on many levels rather than male-identified, there is a serious problem for the woman performer approaching Shakespeare's plays. The picture becomes even more complicated if one begins considering that all the women's roles were originally written for boys and young men. Few women actors have the luxury of controlling the interpretation of their parts except in minor ways. The domination of the Man-as-Self atmosphere is further reinforced by the sheer numbers of men compared to women, in casts for Shakespearean plays as a whole. Even such strong characters as Desdemona and Isabella are defined, even created, by men (of the church, family, or state) and they finally act according to the men's rules because it is the men's game. Shakespeare is an important part of his Western heritage and he must be addressed. To dismiss his works out of hand as sexist is cavalier; but to label them as feminist, is also too slick and falsely comforting. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED248567

Shakespeare and the Feminist Actor

by Rhonda Blair

Presented at

The American Theatre Association Convention

August 12-15, 1984
San Francisco, CA

Rhonda Blair
Hampshire College Theatre
Hampshire College
Amherst, MA 01002
413-549-4600

Copyright: August 1984

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Rhonda Blair

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 699

Shakespeare and
the Feminist Actor

We are typically a bit awed by Shakespeare's reputation as the greatest English-language playwright. Phrases and images from his plays pervade our culture as few others do. The central place of his works in our hearts and minds drives us to seek an honest reflection of ourselves in them. Of course, this presents particular problems for women. Shakespeare was a male writer, a product of his era (who surely at times transcended it), and in this respect he is no more a feminist than Euripides or Tennessee Williams. Yet there are woman-valuing elements in the plays, and it is too simple to label them all good or all bad. Unfortunately, much of the recent feminist criticism of Shakespeare has focused solely or far too heavily on these feminist elements, resulting in what amount to apologias for the bard. Many times the assumptions I sense lurking behind this writing may be described as: 1) Shakespeare is undoubtedly a great playwright and it is desirable to produce his works, 2) it is desirable to be a feminist, and therefore 3) it is good for feminists to study and do Shakespeare. Within this frame, various critical perspectives are presented, by writers such as Irene Dash, Juliet Dusinberre, Marilyn Frency, Lisa Jardine, and Angela Pitt.[1] However, there is much difference between reading and writing about the plays, and the activity of rehearsing and performing them. Too little has been written by or from the perspective of the woman who is both a feminist and

a performer of Shakespeare; there is little which discusses the actual doing of the roles. I am a feminist (defining the term simply here, as an attitude which grants selfhood and self-determination to women equal to that of men) who has read some criticism. I have done much more acting. And I would like to share what I learned about enacting Shakespeare.

The major problem with Shakespeare for the woman performer is a metonymy of the problem women have had in the world for millenia and which has made this equality difficult to achieve: he treats women as the Other. In Comic Women, Tragic Men, Linda Bamber does an excellent job of developing this point. Using de Beauvoir's terminology, Bamber states that Shakespeare consistently presents Man as the Self, and Woman as the Other, i.e., as that by which the Self defines and contrasts itself. Woman is thus part of the environment, a form of external reality:[2]

> Being somewhat distant from the centers of female experience, Shakespeare does not deal with the flux of women's inner lives. But in a mode where life is not primarily inner he imagines women with the same distance on themselves as he has on them.[3]

Therefore, the women characters lack the completeness of the men; the women become iconistic forces by means of which the men shape themselves, mirrors in which the men more or less accurately see themselves and their desires and fears. If one defines a feminist work of art as one which presents a woman self-identified and expressive on many levels rather than male-identified (whether she

be disgustingly virtuous or marvelously wicked), there is a serious problem for the woman performer approaching Shakespeare's plays. For how do you play the Ohter? (One does it, of course, the same way one does it every day of her life, but that is another matter.)

The picture becomes even more complicated if one begins considering that all the women's roles were originally written for boys and young men, many of the women's roles involve cross-dressing (none of the men's do, unless Cleopatra's description of Antony in drag), and that since the early 1800s many women have played major male roles such as Hamlet and Romeo. Further, the sheer aesthetic appeal of many of the roles and plays is very strong, even to the point of making one willing to compromise one's standards. But I will focus on the simplest, most common of cases, that of a woman playing a "straight" women's role for an audience today.

Unlike the director or critic, the actor is not even illusorily in control of the final product, i.e., she cannot rewrite or deconstruct the text, she cannot choose how to write the essay or the review. The actor typically works with non-feminist male directors and producers, and even women directors and producers with whom she works may often not be feminists. Her role is thus doubly secondary, in terms of its impact on the script and in terms of the import and understanding given her role in the production. Few women actors have the luxury of controlling the interpretation of their parts except in minor ways. The domination of the Man-as-Self atmosphere is further reinforced by the sheer numbers of men to women in casts for the plays and in Shakespearean companies as a whole. If dwelt

upon, these general conditions are enough to lead to paralysis.

To speak of specifics: in summer 1983 I played Desdemona in Othello and Isabella in Measure for Measure for a professional Shakespeare company. In thinking about that experience and this topic for some time, I have run through responses ranging from the unconditionally positive ("Certainly Shakespeare is a feminist; it is evident in the greatness of his plays") to the completely negative ("All of his plays present an unregenerate patriarchal world--no good woman gets out of them alive and/or unmarried").[4]

In June I went into rehearsals convinced, even barely questioning, that it was possible to play both Desdemona and Isabella as strong women, and to play them in a positive way. Further, the company producer (who also directed Othello), the business manager, and the company manager were all strong women in their early thirties, dedicated to their careers and doing good work as they saw it.[5] I anticipated an atypical, woman-balanced experience.

Othello was the first show of the season. In early talks, even before rehearsals began, the director was adamant about presenting Desdemona as Othello's equal, his comrade, the "fair warrior" worthy of his respect as well as his desire; so were I and the actor playing Othello, and we all felt it possible to convey this to the audience as well as use it for a cornerstone for our approach. We had five weeks of rehearsals, and began with the intention that Desdemona be as necessary and pivotal a presence as Othello and Iago.

However, as rehearsals progressed, it became clear that, while Desdemona may be "the cause," she is not a personna nearly so fully drawn and voiced as the men. We did not find a way to have her

remain a warrior and power-equal of Othello's, but rather, in spite of our efforts, she increasingly followed stereotypical patterns of submission and disempowerment in marriage, inevitably transforming from the strong woman who speaks to the Duke in her own behalf at the play's start into the passive, silent, finally dead wife. Part of this is due to the fact that Desdemona lacks any important speeches of interiority, unlike the male characters. Madelon Gohlke strongly makes this point in her essay, "'All that is spoke is marred': Language and consciousness in Othello." Thus it is difficult to construct a strong emotional understanding of Desdemona based on the text. As Gohlke says, "the women characters in the tragedies often begin in a forceful and articulate manner, only to lapse later into silence, madness or radically ambiguous speech."[6] Following this pattern, Desdemona spirals into confusion and death. Her deterioration is essentially connected to the fact that Shakespeare treats her as the Other; he does not crack open and illuminate the complexities of her inner life in nearly so specific a way as Othello's and Iago's. As a dramatic construct, Desdemona is not only quite generic, she is even nebulous; Shakespeare transmutes her as necessary. This is enhanced within the world of the play, in which Desdemona is almost totally a creation of the men around her, metamorphosing according to what is projected upon her, first by her father Brabantio, then by her husband. Her strengths and weaknesses are never just her own.

Near the play's start Brabantio describes Desdemona as

> A maiden never bold;
> Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
> Blushed at herself, [. . .][7]

Until her elopement she is dutiful and properly behaved, taking excellent care of her father's house. This hardly jibes with the view of Desdemona-as-fair-warrior, as strong, clear-headed woman. Yet as strong as Desdemona seems as her first appearance, asserting her independence and choice before the Duke's court in the middle of the night, the strength comes from her new alliance, a source outside herself, her husband. And in the end her husband takes this power away. By the play's end Desdemona has retreated and retransformed into the passive listener, the obedient, silent woman who eventually ceases to exist altogether. The warrior Desdemona is in fact created and destroyed by Othello, generated through the power of his passion and his stories (e.g., about his troubled youth, his exploits in battle, his mother and the handkerchief):

> [. . .] My story being done,
> She gave me for my pains a world of sighs. [. . .]
> She wished she had not heard it; yet she wished
> That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me
> And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story,
> And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.
> She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
> And I loved her that she did pity them. (18)

Desdemona is a vicarious, symbiotic creature. This is confirmed in her first words:

> My noble father,
> I do perceive here a divided duty.
> To you I am bound for life and education;
> My life and education both do learn me
> How to respect you: you are the lord of duty;
> I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;
> And so much duty as my mother showed
> To you, preferring you before her father,
> So much I challenge that I may profess
> Due to the Moor my lord. (19)

Desdemona exists firmly within the context of her men, concerned with duty and obedience, a kind of feminine Proteus.

As her context shift and becomes distorted in the course of the play, as Othello first questions, then argues, then strikes, then kisses and kills her, so she alters and becomes poisoned by doubt and weakness. Desdemona even thoroughly internalizes the evil around her, feeling guilty but not quite sure of what she is guilty:

> 'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet;
> How have I been behaved, that he might stick
> The small'st opinion on my least misuse? (98)

Even after Othello strikes her, she loves him unequivocally:

> My love doth so approve him
> That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns
> . . . have grace and favor in them. (103)

It is possible to view Desdemona as falling even more deeply in love with Othello the more he abuses her.

Meanwhile, Othello continues to become more and more distraught, his madness possibly most strongly expressed as he watches the sleeping Desdemona and talks of killing her:

> Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee
> And love thee after. [. . .]
> [. . .] This sorrow's heavenly,
> It strikes where it doth love. (114)

Desdemona is not quite so far gone, knowing "That death's unnatural that kills for loving" (115). Yet she never puts up a fight, and even confirms her perversely protean/Other nature after Othello has smothered her, momentarily coming back to life in order to do herself in utterly. Reviving, she begins correctly: "O falsely,

falsely murdered," "A guiltless death I die" (118). But when Emilia asks who did this, Desdemona responds, 'Nobody--I myself. Farewell./Commend me to my kind lord" (119), and dies for good. With this final phrase, Desdemona lies, erases herself by equating herself with "nobody," removes the guilt from her husband and takes it on herself, and there is never a hint that she loves him less than ever. She is an archetype of the long-suffering, all-loving, self-effacing and -erasing wife.

To be sure, there are many appealing things about playing Desdemona. She is desirable by conventional standards, young, intelligent, sweet, "is fair, feeds well, loves company,/Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well" (64). The role is the female lead in a Shakespearean tragedy. And if one likes the actors playing Othello and Emilia with whom one is working, as I did, there is even more to make things pleasant.

But it is just through such seductions--of the ego, of automatic and easy response to preconditioned sexual and social patterns--that I felt myself gradually being disempowered and playing out patterns of increasingly distressed dependence, i.e., a small degree of Plato's "imbibing the reality" occurred. It may simply be that I am particularly susceptible, but I think not, for actors are fundamentally protean.

The process of Desdemona's disenfranchisement roughly paralleled my own experience in rehearsals. I had a growing realization that it all--the ideas of Desdemona as peer and warrior, the very lines and actions she is given--did not fit together, that in fictive and factual realms, respectively, neither Desdemona nor I had

control of any significant kind; neither the character nor I determined the outcome in any primary way. As rehearsals progressed, the director became more and more focused on Othello and Iago. This is to be expected, since they have a vast amount of stage time, much of it together--but it belied our intentions regarding the balanced triumvirate at the heart of the play. We had in fact blinded ourselves to the text. The actors playing Othello and Iago worked ever more smoothly together; part of this had to do with the particular actors, but there is a genuine camaraderie built into the script. The actor playing Othello and I became less communicative, though we had started off working together very well. I began pressing him to work freely on scenes or moments, paralleling Desdemona's efforts, while the actor became less and less willing to do so, shutting down as Othello does. There was an element of sexual tension involved as well, and I do not think the actor or I ever figured what to do about it. In the course of rehearsals, I became closer and closer to the actor playing Emilia.

I became preoccupied with why things were not working as easily as they had, since on the surface our approach seemed to make such sense. Some of this questioning was of the kind that naturally occurs in working on a role, and it is necessary. But some of it was neither good nor appropriate. I started trying to figure out what I, particularly, was doing wrong, though I was following all the rules. I internalized and accepted responsibility for weaknesses in the character, in the script, for what I was not getting from another actor or from the director. I turned in on myself. Just as Desdemona does.

The production was very solid and very well received. We got fine reviews. It was always a joy to do the first half of the performance. It was often ennervating to do the last half. That was because it was a lie; the Desdemona I believed in remained the strong, fair warrior, and I never learned in my bones how she could turn so weak and stupid simply because she got married and went to Cyprus. That core which I carried into rehearsals never truly metamorphosed into the Desdemona who submits and succumbs in the end. She was less than I thought her.

I expected Isabella to be much more straightforward in terms of analysis and execution. She was a "type" I was used to playing. She has a strong moral code, and stands apart from any husband or lover. She has at least four major scenes in which she is an active, intelligent participant, and even a soliloquy in which she confronts the dilemma of sleeping with Angelo or seeing her brother beheaded. I thought Isabella a paragon of virtue and a monolith of strength, secure in her values and having the courage to act upon them and the intelligence to make informed decisions.

However, Measure for Measure is with good reason called a problem play. The most elementary reading reveals numerous possible interpretations of theme and motive. At the heart of this maze is the behavior of the Duke of Vienna: he turns the city over to Angelo to clean it up, disguises himself as a friar, uses that disguise to persuade two young women to set a moral trap for Angelo (rather than confronting his surrogate himself), lies to Isabella about her brother's death so that he can give her "heavenly comfort" at a time when it suits him, and sets everyone up for one

of the more credulity-stretching final scenes in Shakespeare, in which the Duke's game-playing and manipulation reach a climax.

Decisions about Vienna and the Duke set the ground for defining Isabella. In our production the director chose to emphasize extreme moral, sexual decay in the city and (strangely) not the malice, but the naivete and exuberance of a young Duke (this in spite of indications in the script that the Duke has ruled Vienna for at least fourteen years).[8] The Duke was played as a bit of a scamp, well-intentioned but not always considering the implications of his actions. I came to the work with a bias that Isabella was virtuous, intelligent, and had the clearest moral vision, in an ideal sense, of all the characters. The starting ground was thus Vienna was corrupt, Isabella was good, and she remained so.

Our director worked primarily with very specific, pre-set staging and relatively general guidelines regarding character; he was concerned with the look of a moment and relied upon us to fill the play in terms of inner life. As early rehearsals progressed, Isabella became more and more of a cipher to me, for my preconceptions (as so often is the case with preconceptions) could not hold. I defined three major stages in her development: in the first, her values are traditional, austere, Catholic (she is entering the Poor Clares, who are not strict enough for her); then revenge for her brother's execution and her own dishonor become the motivating force; finally, she accepts her persecutor's hand in marriage--the motives here are unclear. I eventually realized that Isabella is more the young, virginal ingenue than the strong would-be Clare, and she in fact fits Gohlke's definition of Shakespeare's tragic heroines; Isabella begins "in a forceful and articulate manner

only to lapse later into silence, madness or radically ambiguous speech."[9]

At the play's start Isabella is confirmed in her Catholicism and possesses a gift for persuasion (11). Even so, she rarely if ever takes charge without being pushed to it, and she often gives up her suit after the initial asking unless urged to pursue it by a man, i.e., Lucio, the friar-Duke, Claudio, even Angelo. She is not by nature an assertive person, she is properly, femininely modest. She is sometimes not immediately aware of what is being said to her or even the implications of what she herself is saying, e.g., during the scene in which Angelo propositions her (41-44). She is naive.

And at least I realized, fighting my idealism all the way, that Isabella's path is one of growing corruption, cynicism, and cooptation into the Duke's world. In her first encounter with Angelo she pleads for heavenly mercy, in her second she is propositioned and rejects Angelo's advances violently, appalled that the surrogate for the Duke could be so decayed. She steels herself, proceeds to her brother to tell him of his fate, and when he also begs her to save him by sleeping with Angelo, she damns Claudio as well; first the State, then Family betray her as she tries to follow what both have told her is God's law. So Isabella listens more directly to "God-on-earth," the Duke disguised as the friar, and agrees to participate in the infamous bed trick. The only justifications for this possibly are that 1) Angelo is Mariana's husband on a precontract (though this argument is never used to defend the betrothed Claudio and Julietta); 2) lying is only a

venial sin and therefore it is easier for Isabella to accept; 3) Isabella is increasingly desperate to save her brother; 4) since the friar sets up the ploy, it must be alright. Isabella is increasingly drawn into the realm of conditionality, of the real, gray world. (It is interesting that Shakespeare did not include the scene in which Isabella goes to Angelo and gets the keys to his quarters.)

I do not want to address possible reasons for the Duke's sadistic behavior, in particular his lie to Isabella that her brother has been executed the morning after Mariana has kept the bargain with Angelo. For Isabella, Claudio is dead, justice--heavenly and temporal--is nowhere to be found, and she finds herself without a center, without a faith. It does not occur to her to let be, to remember her own words to Angelo about the nature of love and mercy, and to Claudio about the preferability of life in heaven to that on earth. She quite simply now finds it more important to get revenge (a province rightfully of God, by Christian doctrine). Getting revenge is a way of feeling one can exert power over what happens. Power over her lot on earth is what Isabella really wants; she wants some control.

The final act of the play sends Isabella's world even more to pieces. In spite of her eloquent plea for justice before the Duke in the crowded square (in which she lies about having slept with Angelo), she is humiliated, rejected, and carted off to jail. When she is brought back, the Duke reveals himself as having been the friar. Isabella is sufficiently humbled? benevolent? penitent? strong? to plead for mercy for the devilish Angelo in spite of

this because Mariana begs her to. Again, she is rejected by the Duke. From this point--and this is crucial to note--Isabella says not one word. She is silent, even though she is reunited with her "dead" brother, Mariana and Angelo are married and he is forgiven, and--most incredibly--the Duke proposes marriage and Isabella, the Poor Clare postulant, accepts. As Isabella says, "Is it not strange and strange?" (93).

How does one play that silence? What does it mean? I doubt that Shakespeare would have done such a thing to a major male character. Just as with Desdemona, Isabella is defined, even created by men (of the Church, family, State), and she finally acts according to their rules because it is their game. So one has a number of choices in understanding Isabella's betrothal: she is merciful and forgives the Duke, understanding why he did what he did (there is some support for this); she has been totally corrupted and marries the Duke for economic and political gain (there is no support for this); she marries him to get justice (revenge?), to exert an Old Testament eye-for-an-eye vengeance. For me, there was the most support for this, given our overall production. Isabella is in the Duke's world (indeed, there is no world which is not his, for he controls even the cloisters), has learned what that world is like, and becomes willing to play by its rules to get what she wants. And so, at the end of the play, I crossed slowly and dangerously to the Duke's side, not averting my gaze, my face a mask, and firmly, ominously took the proffered hand. I am not sure all of the audience got all that I intended, but there were shudders and uncomfortable laughter as some realized the Duke was going to get more than he bargained for.

As I had not succeeded with Desdemona, I did succeed in making Isabella at least an equal with her male counterparts. But the ground was still overwhelmingly male. And sadly, even though one can say the plays of Shakespeare are period pieces, that is both to belittle their genuine value and to fail to see that they are still all too reflective of our world today. As the summer progressed, I became more and more afflicted by the sense of playing out old, destructive patterns which were not elucidated by a hope for a woman-valuing (and hence man-valuing) change to come. Identification and familiarity factors were high, but enlightenment was sorely lacking. We learned that Othello very nearly loses himself utterly, but regains his nobility before he d es; the Duke manages to straighten everything up, finally, and arranges everyone in neat marriages so that it all works out in the end. Desdemona never figures out what she does wrong. And Isabella--we have to guess or make it up ourselves, because she does not tell us. By and large, I spent my summer reinforcing patriarchal culture.

Shakespeare is an important part of our heritage and he must be addressed. To dismiss the works out of hand as sexist is cavalier. But to label them (or some aspect of them) as feminist, through some minor shift in analysis or interpretation or through wishful thinking, is also too slick and falsely comforting. Too often in talking and writing about these plays we forget that their proof is in being enacted, by human beings for other human beings. and that their greatness lies in the clear, pure insights they give us about what it means to be human. Thus we must strive for clarity, both about who we are and about what we see

in the text. Then this standard of honesty and clarity must be even more rigorously employed in rehearsing and performing the plays. Our working out of the pieces must occur not only with the minds, but the bodies and spirits of today, with the same selves that are adamant about equal pay for equal work or any current, immediate social problem, with the same selves that try, however haltingly, to achieve understanding, parity, and love in our homes. And if Shakespeare's texts finally cannot permit this, or if we cannot find producers and directors willing to take this path, then we must be thankful for what we have gleaned from the plays in the past and set them aside. An actor has only herself. She is what she chooses. She is what she does.

Notes

[1] Irene G. Dash, Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981; Juliet Dusinberre, Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975; Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983; Angela Pitt, Shakespeare's Women, Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1981.

[2] Linda Bamber, Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1982, pp. 42-43.

[3] Bamber, p. 38.

[4] This response came after encountering Mary Daly for the first time, in her books and in person.

[5] The company was Louisville's Shakespeare in Central Park; the women were Bekki Jo Schneider, Austin Cooper, and Janie Davis. This is an excellent organization with excellent leadership.

[6] Madelon Gohlke, "'All that is spoke is marred': Language and consciousness in Othello," in Women's Studies, Vol. 9, 1982, p. 157.

[7] William Shakespeare, Othello, New York: Washington Square Press (Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare), 1957, p. 16. From this point until otherwise noted, parenthetical numbers refer to pages in this text.

[8] Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, New York: Pocket Books (Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare), 1965, p. 12. From this point, parenthetical numbers refer to pages in this text.

[9] Gohlke, p. 157.